Creative Writing at the Two-Year College: Creating Opportunity and Community

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New Voice

By growing creative writing courses and programs, community colleges can improve retention while also fostering supportive communities of student and faculty writers.

When we set out to create an associate of fine arts degree (AFA) in creative writing at my community college, we met with some resistance from fellow faculty, administration, and even faculty at four-year schools, who questioned the purpose or value of creating such a program at the community college level. What place do the arts have at community colleges? Were we overstepping boundaries? How would we ever fill those classes? These questions and fears were based on negative past experiences with program innovation, as well as outdated views and ideas about what a community college does and should do. In the end, our program has flourished and has exported its model successfully to community colleges around the country, offering more and more students the opportunity to study creative writing at the two-year college level.

The value of creative writing at the community college centers on the very purpose of the community college—an institution of higher education with open doors. Students end up at community colleges for many reasons. Some attend because they are high-performing high school students and qualify to take college classes early—though they may not possess the maturity and time management skills of their older peers. Some come to us because of financial concerns or difficulties; some attend because they are juggling work and school; others attend because of failing out of high school or a four-year college; some attend because they are challenged with disabilities or mental illness; some attend because they are recovering from visible and invisible wounds, illnesses, accidents, or addictions. The bottom line is that students attending community college usually have stressors or challenges in their lives that traditional college students do not typically face.

While these challenges may seem like barriers at the outset, they can also be gifts; a challenging life is a life rich in material for writing. The barriers and demands community college students often face, along with the nonresidential campus, can also make these students feel isolated and alone. Writing can help these students...
find their voices and find others like themselves—which can greatly increase the likelihood that they will remain in school and finish a degree.

During the past few years, as we built our creative writing program, one of my colleagues posted this quote on his door, from a speech given by Lucille Clifton: “it is nice to find your tribe, or actually, what happens is, your tribe finds you; and you are so happy.” I asked him why he had posted it, and he said, “Because I love writing, and I love teaching here. And because I want my students to love writing and studying here. I’ve found my tribe, and I want them to find theirs.” This quotation has become a kind of unofficial motto of our creative writing program, because not only have our students found their tribe of peer writers, but the faculty has as well. We currently have seven published writers teaching in the program, and we have a very strong working relationship, with the common goal of both modeling the habits of good writers and teaching the craft of creative writing.

Before students can find their “tribe,” they need to know themselves. As Kay Ryan, former US poet laureate, community college graduate, and community college instructor states: “You don’t know what you think unless you can write. I think we have to make an object, because the conversation inside ourselves is so intimate that we can’t see it unless we can make a product and see it. In a way, writing creates a second person for you. When you write you are two people. Because you are writing to the writer, and the writer is talking to you” (qtd. in Faulkner).

Most writers I know identify with that statement—we can remember a time when writing freed thoughts or ideas we didn’t know we had, or when a piece of writing helped us confess our own feelings to ourselves—sometimes to our great surprise. Because many community college students arrive at our doors with unresolved issues, sometimes related to a disconnection with themselves, writing can be an invaluable tool in that search for self.

One former student of mine, Carl, had failed out of a prestigious university. He was a brilliant student, when he managed to show up for class. He read the material, wrote flawless papers, and then would disappear for weeks at a time. He was addicted to drugs and couldn’t shake it. He dropped out. A few semesters later, after he was in recovery, he enrolled in a creative writing class, and started writing poetry. “I feel like I’m finally getting to know myself again,” he told me. Since that time, Carl has continued his studies and is now in graduate school.

While creative writing can be therapeutic and emotionally enriching, we must also stress the academic rigor of creative writing—the mastery of craft techniques. As they master these techniques, students begin to know themselves better intellectually and academically, developing the confidence they need to succeed both as writers and as students. They think not only about how to express themselves, but how to adjust their writing to fit their audience’s needs—in other words, to bridge the space between self-centeredness and empathy, a key role of studying in the humanities.

For an entire semester, Sam came to class with amazingly complex poems. He said little, often staring at the floor or at his shoes when speaking or listening. His comments on peer’s poems, however, were sophisticated and helpful, though he
rarely believed this was so. Once in awhile, he wrote poems with allusions to literary works—Greek myth, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, or Dante—and none of his classmates would be familiar enough with the original works to understand his poetry. Then, he entered a creative writing contest—and won. The next day, he was waiting for me at my office. “Do you think I could be a writer?” he asked. “I think you already are a writer,” I replied. After we sat down and talked awhile, he confided that as a student labeled as having a disability, he had always disliked school, and thought that his complex writing was a liability, not an asset. Winning the award had finally made him realize that he might actually be good at something—writing—and that other people might make a connection with him, and be interested in what he had to say. Sam told me he had never dreamed he could graduate from college—but now that he had found something he was good at, he wanted to graduate with an AFA in creative writing. And he did just that.

Once students find themselves as writers, they also find their “tribe”—that community of writers they will join—other students who share their love for writing, and who will appreciate and engage with their work.

Tribes of student writers happen in and out of class. Sometimes students find each other in a creative writing class and keep meeting and sharing their work after the class is over. Sometimes students meet in a creative writing club or other extracurricular group.

A creative writing program also creates a cohort of student writers, and this tribe often survives beyond graduation. A few years ago, five students formed a workshop group in one of my classes. Three of these students chose to attend the same four-year school, in part so they could continue their writing group. Two other members moved away, one out of the country—but they continue to workshop each other’s writing, using Facebook and email. They continue to suggest books, music, and poetry to one another. Even though they are geographically separated, they consider themselves a unit, a tribe of writers.

A successful community college creative writing program creates a space for creative writers to flourish, both in and out of class. Essentially, to return to the tribe metaphor, it creates opportunities for writers to find each other, work with one another, and form a community.

A solid community college creative writing program gives students opportunities to share their work in publications and in performance; validates them as writers; provides unique leadership opportunities, such as editing the literary magazine or organizing a club; and provides a clear path to transfer. One big advantage of a fully developed program is that it increases graduation rates significantly. Typically, a community college graduates about 25 percent of its students within three years of their enrollment. Students in our AFA program, however, have a three-year graduation rate of around 75–80 percent, on average.

There are two main characteristics of a successful creative writing program—curricular and extracurricular. Currently, there are three curriculum models for community college creative writing programs: a certificate in creative writing, an
AA (associate of arts) with an emphasis in creative writing, and an AFA in creative writing.

Certificate programs are usually not designed as transfer degrees; they consist of a set of creative writing and literature courses designed to give a student experience with a wide range of genres. Emphasis programs are usually designed as associate’s degrees with additional work in creative writing and literature; these degrees transfer much the same as a regular associate’s degree. AFA programs are very similar to emphasis programs, but most have specific transfer agreements with nearby BFA or BA programs in creative writing. AFA programs stress the transfer path and the idea that students are preparing for further study in creative writing, specifically.

Courses typically offered in all programs include an introductory course, which covers a minimum of two genres (fiction and poetry) and often covers all four genres (fiction, poetry, play/screenwriting, and creative nonfiction); and two or more dedicated genre courses in poetry, fiction, play/screenwriting, and creative nonfiction. Some campuses offer topics courses or a second-level mixed genre course.

In addition to regular creative writing coursework, all AFA programs and many AA with emphasis programs require students to take a capstone course, which can take the form of an independent study project or a small group intensive study experience.

Reading and writing are intimately connected—so a good community college creative writing program must have a strong literature component. Typically, students are required to take at least two sophomore-level literature courses that center on contemporary literature or literature of diversity.

While curriculum is the cornerstone of a creative writing program, the extracurricular activities are necessary for several reasons: they round out the program, involve students and community members outside of the program, and, in the end, create an environment that values writing and literature. Examples of successful extracurriculars include a creative writing club, a reading series, and a scholarship fund or award, all of which engage students in different ways and encourage them to improve their writing skills.

In order for students to continue their education as writers after graduating from a community college, they must find a four-year school where they can connect with a new level of their tribe—and good community college programs pave that path for students by negotiating workable articulation agreements with four-year schools where their students will thrive as writers and students.

To this end, we have initiated several articulation agreements for the AFA in creative writing program at our college, which allow students to transfer easily into BFA in creative writing programs at both public and private colleges across the state. These agreements were not easy to negotiate. They took time, patience, and sometimes pride-swallowing. Some institutions give students better transfer deals than others. But my students have a choice as to where they transfer, and in every instance they are ahead in the number of credits they will need to graduate. Interestingly enough, the most popular transfer institution for our students is a...
private college with a tuition bill of around $30,000 per year. Hamline gives our students the most credits toward their BFA and also provides academically talented and diverse students with significant financial aid.

But school is not just about money, as all of us know. It’s about connecting with faculty, other students, and the material. In the course of negotiating these agreements, we got to know the faculty at these institutions and felt comfortable entrusting them with our students. We care about our students as people, as writers, and want to be sure that we are sending them to a place where they will flourish and blossom as people and writers.

One great example of this kind of flourishing involves Kevin, a US Marine vet who did two tours of duty in Iraq. At the age of twenty-three, he came to our community college to take classes. His composition instructor noticed Kevin’s knack for writing and encouraged him to take a creative writing course. He showed up in my intro to creative writing class, front and center, a big smile on his face, and he worked hard. Every time I commented on a paper, he reworked the parts I marked. He engaged with other students’ work in our workshops and responded positively to feedback he received from his peers. At the end of the semester, we had finalized the AFA in creative writing degree, and he was one of the first students to sign up.

In the following semesters, Kevin continued to work and rework drafts until they were polished and publication ready. He attended reading series events, published his poetry in the literary magazine, the *Paper Lantern*, and placed in the annual scholarship award competition two years in a row. He served as president of the creative writing club and finished his capstone project—a chapbook of poetry based on his time serving in Iraq. Kevin’s crowning achievement while in the AFA program was winning a national competition: the AWP Intro Journals Award; this award was especially meaningful because he competed against master’s and PhD-level students and was the first community college student to ever win. The poem appeared in a nationally respected literary magazine.

After graduating with his AFA, Kevin took advantage of our articulation agreement with a private university and graduated from their BFA in creative writing program; he has been accepted by three prestigious MFA in creative writing programs and plans to continue his studies at one of them.

While Kevin’s postgraduation path continued in the discipline of creative writing, AFA graduates have gone on to major in many other fields and enter many other professions, including law, law enforcement, hospitality, film studies, literature, business, psychology, and professional writing. Knowing how to write well is an asset no matter what the subsequent major or professional choice.

The argument for creating this type of program at the community college is compelling, but it takes time and planning; the kind of program developed also greatly depends on the size and type of community being served by the college; the support of the administration, faculty, and students; and the proximity of transfer institutions. However, it cannot be denied that community colleges are attracting more and more students, and the demand for writing classes is growing. According
to current estimates, 44 percent of all first-year college students attend a community college—approximately twelve million students, at about 1,500 two-year colleges.

My home campus is a good example of the growth seen in community colleges over the past ten years and the subsequent growth of interest in creative writing. In 1999, when I began teaching here, about 5,000 students were enrolled. One section of Introduction to Creative Writing was offered each semester, so about 50 students per year were enrolled in a creative writing course. Today, our college enrolls an average of 15,000 students per year, and 500 or more students per year enroll in creative writing classes. We have an AFA in creative writing degree and a creative writing certificate option. A thriving Creative Writing Club produces a literary magazine published twice per year, and the college also hosts a well-respected Reading Series and Writing Festival, which brings in well-known national and local writers and attracts community members to campus.

As Pulitzer Prize–winning poet and community college graduate Gwendolyn Brooks said, “We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” A successful community college creative writing program is a place where student writers find community, and a path to another degree or a career in writing is paved for them; they find mentors in faculty and other students as they become the disciplined, enthusiastic writers they were meant to be. They find their tribe, and they are never the same.

Note
1. All student names used in this article are pseudonyms.

References


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